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The Indivisibility of Change: The Challenge of Trauma to the Genre of Coming-of-Age Narratives

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Abstract

Evie Wyld's novel *All the Birds, Singing* (2013) draws attention to the interrelation of personal history, trauma narratives, and coming-of-age stories. Herein, Wyld's novel will be analysed with reference to two bodies of theory: Bergson's model of the "indivisibility of change" (p. 263), which re-conceptualizes the past as part of a "perpetual present" (p. 262), and Pederson's revised literary theory of trauma, which deviates from crucial tenets of traditional literary trauma studies. Due to the novel's unconventional structure of a backward-moving narrative strand interlocked with a forward-moving one, the crisis the narrator experienced in adolescence moves centre stage, which shows that, in the case of trauma, coming-of-age requires a continual negotiating of this experience. The novel challenges "strategically grim" coming-of-age narratives that represent trauma merely "as part of a narrative of the young protagonist's redemption or maturation," so that "resolution occurs as a matter of narrative convention [...]" (Gilmore and Marshall, p. 23). *All the Birds, Singing* demonstrates that the painstaking processing of a painful personal history in narrative, achieved by establishing a dialogue of voices (and thus of selves), is an essential prerequisite for maturation. Accordingly, the genre of coming-of-age narratives, besides including novels that present a crisis merely as a necessary step on the way to adult life, also needs to incorporate texts documenting the persistence of trauma in a protagonist's life.

Keywords: coming-of-age narrative, genre, trauma, literary trauma theory

Introduction

Evie Wyld's novel *All the Birds, Singing* (2013) draws attention to the interrelation of personal history, trauma narratives, and coming-of-age stories. The narrator-protagonist, Jake Whyte, who grew up in Australia, is deeply traumatized by her experience of a first, unhappy love as a young teenager. After realising that Denver, the boy to whom she was attracted, only talked to her in order to get close to another girl, Flora, Jake flung a cigarette in frustration and triggered the bush fire that killed Flora. At the hospital bedside of the unconscious Denver, Jake promised to admit her guilt, but then escaped from the police. After a long odyssey, during which she was beaten up by an angry mob, worked as a prostitute, was held captive as a sex slave and escaped to a far-away sheep farm, she finally left Australia to single-handedly run a farm on a remote British isle. Due to its generic hybridity, reviewers have labelled Wyld's novel a gothic novel, a mystery, a fantasy and a horror story, amongst other descriptions. Yet, since the most horrific moment in this text is related to a Jake's growing-up process, *All the Birds, Singing* must above all be considered a coming-of-age narrative.

Typically, texts belonging to the genre of coming-of-age narratives represent a young protagonist's transition from childhood to adulthood. This transition period conventionally includes one or several moments of crisis that the protagonist has to overcome. As Baxter (2013) argues, "[t]he developmental arc of the protagonist is motivated by the desire to become an adult, and this journey toward adulthood quite often entails struggle" (p. 3). Mintz (2013) reasons that his struggle may take the form of trials or difficult experiences centred on issues such as "education [...] or on rebellion against a father, on sexual initiation, or on experience of first love" (p. 55). Moretti (1985) distinguishes between trials as obstacles and trials as opportunity (p. 132). If the protagonist's trial functions as an obstacle, he/she must overcome a barrier to "enter into [his/her] own role as an adult" (p. 132). By comparison, if the trial is perceived as an opportunity, it is "not an obstacle to be overcome" but "something that must be *incorporated*, for only by stringing together 'experiences' does one build a personality" (p. 132; emphasis given). In any case, "[...] 'coming of age' signifies an arrival at a destination [...]" (Baxter, 2013, p. 3): the young person is considered to have matured or 'come of age' when these troubles have been solved, and a 'complete, cohesive, stable sense of self' has been achieved" (Baxter, 2013, p. 4). The last phase of the young adult's development is, therefore, granted ample space and is moved centre stage in conventional coming-of-age narratives. On a textual level, the resolution of his/her troubles is usually mirrored by a sense of closure at the end of the narrative. As Gilmore and Marshall (2013) argue, stories primarily focusing on the solution of the young protagonist's conflicts are essentially "pedagogical" (p. 23). The lesson these texts teach their teenage readers concerns the question of what it means to mature. Such texts often "[...] feature adolescents who come of age in hard circumstances, but find redemption in adulthood. When the adolescent narrator or protagonist ends up wiser for the hardship, difficulty is incorporated into a meaningful lesson" (Gilmore and Marshall, 2013, p. 23). Consequently, the difficulties faced by the young protagonists typically serve as a mere narrative convention. Gilmore and Marshall develop the concept of so-called "strategically grim" coming-of-age narratives to refer to texts that include critical moments, traumata or conflicts merely for strategic reasons:

These representations of trauma are employed as part of a narrative of the young protagonist's redemption or maturation [...] Although narratives for teen readers often depict danger and crisis, we characterize them as strategically grim if crises resolve as a young protagonist steers out of harm's way. That is, resolution occurs as a matter of narrative convention, affirms the cultural construction of growing

up as an individual, if perilous, passage, and refrains from a critique of the formations that permit violence. (p. 22)

With many strategically grim coming-of-age narratives, in other words, readers tend to focus more on the young person's maturation, whereas the moment of crisis or trauma itself is not at the centre of critical attention. Yet this model proves insufficient in the case of Wyld's *All the Birds, Singing*. Bergson's (2002) concept of the "indivisibility of change" (p. 263), and Pederson's (2014) revised literary trauma theory, in turn, reveal the true significance of trauma for the coming-of-age process. With its rather unconventional narrative structure, the novel challenges the mere strategic role of the trial and provides insight into the long-lasting effects of trauma on adolescence. In doing so, the text also calls for a re-definition of the genre of coming-of-age narratives.

Analysis

All the Birds, Singing opens with Jake Whyte leading a secluded life as a sheepherder on a British isle. She remains a stranger on the island and keeps feeling "unnatural [...] in the place" (Wyld, 2014, p. 18). There are various signs that she is physically and psychologically wounded. Her body is scarred – she arrived on the island with her "arm in a sling" (Wyld, p. 7) and "a blooded thumbprint below [her] ear (p. 5) – and she suffers from repeated panic attacks and paranoia. Jake is startled by every sound, smells dangers everywhere, suffers from terrible nightmares and always has a gun at the ready when she goes to sleep (p. 53). What is more, she comes across as deeply traumatized and paranoid because she feels pursued by almost everyone; for example, she informs the police of her conviction that her sheep did not die naturally, but must have been killed by a mysterious trespasser on her property.

While Jake shows clear symptoms of being haunted by a traumatic past, she never gives any clues as to the cause of her trauma, which is a pattern well documented in traditional trauma studies. According to certain clinical trauma specialists, trauma patients do not talk about the cause of their suffering because they are not able to remember their trauma: it is "so intensely painful that the mind is unable to process it normally," as a consequence of which the patients may "totally forget the event" and suffer from "amnesia" (Pederson, 2014, p. 334). This suggestion was "also a foundational insight for the first wave of literary trauma theorists [...]"¹ Taking the by now heavily contested idea of traumatic amnesia as a starting point for their analysis of literature, they searched for gaps in trauma texts, as textual lacunae were believed to represent the forgotten event, the unspeakable, or memories that "elude straightforward verbal representation" (Pederson, 2014, p. 336). From this point of view, the reader of *All the Birds, Singing* may at first be tempted to consider the fact that Jake never mentions the past as precisely such an instance of a textual void, a circumstance that points to her amnesia and thus to her repression of the traumatic event. As is revealed much later in the novel, however, Jake deliberately does not want to think about her traumatic personal history. She follows her friend Karen's advice to not open certain doors in her brain and ponder on a bad memory but to simply "leave" if it "turns into a bad room [...]" and "find a new door," should the memory be too painful (Wyld, 2014, p. 173).

Jake's determination simply to ignore her past reveals that her notion of history itself deviates from conventional understandings of the concept of the past as a period of time that has passed once and for all. As the philosopher Henri Bergson (2002) explains, the past is commonly

¹ For example, Hartmann, Felman and Caruth (Pederson, 2014, p. 334).

considered to be “inexistent,” as it is regarded as a distinct stage of life that is lost, so that “the present alone exists by itself” (p. 261). Bergson, however, juxtaposes this view with a different vision of the past: he re-conceptualises the past as part of a “perpetual present” (p. 262) and claims that the past “is necessarily automatically preserved” and indeed “survives complete” (p. 253). Consequently, “our most distant past adheres to our present and constitutes with it a single and identical uninterrupted change” (p. 263). This “indivisibility of change” (p. 263) “re-establish[es] continuity” in life (p. 255) and constitutes “true duration” (p. 260). By comparison, “time” is “divisible, quantitative and studied by science,” as Wilson (2007) explains (p. 34). Bergson “privileged duration as that which indicated most truthfully the nature of existence,” as “[i]n duration, time is quality not quantity” and “the past and present are not distinguished [...] but form a whole [...]” (Wilson, 2007, p. 35). The application of Bergson’s concept to *All the Birds, Singing* reveals that Jake’s decision not to think about the past is only possible if, in principle, the past is still available; one can only ignore something that has not been lost. Indeed, Jake’s reaction is not surprising, as to ignore one’s past is very human, as Bergson (2002) emphasizes: “our practical interest is to thrust it aside, or at least to accept of it only what can more or less usefully illuminate and complete the situation in the present [...] The brain serves to bring about this choice: it actualises the useful memories, it keeps in the lower strata of the consciousness those which are of no use” (p. 253). Our mind, in other words, blots out aspects that are not of any apparent use in a concrete situation: “[t]he brain seems to have been constructed with a view to [...] selection” (p. 253). As a consequence, knowledge is an effect of a “sudden dissociation,” in that everyday life demands that human beings narrow their perception (p. 252). Jake, in other words, thrusts away those aspects of her life that are too painful in her present situation.

Indeed, the fact that Jake has blotted out her history – rather than completely forgetting it – not only reveals a different concept of the past but is also congruent with newer findings in psychological and psychiatric trauma research, which deviate from traditional trauma theory. Psychologists have more recently proposed that “traumatic amnesia is a myth, and while victims may *choose* not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence they cannot” (Pederson, 2014, p. 334; emphasis given); “contemporary psychological research suggest[s] that trauma victims can both remember *and* describe their traumatic past in detail” but may not always be willing to do so because the memory is (too) unpleasant and painful (p. 338; emphasis given).² Pederson demands that the literary theory of trauma needs to be revised, too, so as to take into account the new psychological insights about trauma patients’ ability to describe their memories. Deviating from this crucial tenet of traditional literary trauma studies, he suggests that readers should “[...] turn their focus [away] from gaps in the text to the text itself” (p. 338). In other words, instead of searching for instances of lacunae and thus concentrating on what is absent from the text, Pederson invites readers to pay attention to what is there, as this will “open up new expanses of material for interpretation” (p. 338). Interestingly, when proposing that readers should “seek out evidence of augmented narrative detail” and pay attention to what previously may have passed unnoticed (p. 339),³ Pederson seems to apply Bergson’s argument that human beings may well perceive “without seeing” (p. 252) as sometimes our perceptions do not “explicitly strike our senses and our consciousness” (p. 252) and, thus, are not consciously and actively registered. He argues that “[i]f things

² Pederson refers to the psychologist Richard McNally’s publications of “dozens of new studies – both his own and others” published since 2003, in which he challenges “some of the field’s sacred truths” on the basis of his findings in clinical studies of neuroscience (p. 334).

³ Pederson refers to McNally’s finding that “[s]tress does not impair memory; it strengthens it,” as a result of which “trauma may actually enhance memory – rather than banishing or hindering it,” so that “more words – not fewer” may be needed to represent trauma (p. 339; emphasis given).

happened this way, our perception would as a matter of fact be inextensible; it would consist of the assembling of certain specific materials, in a given quantity, and we should never find anything more in it than what had been put there in the first place” (p. 252). For this reason, Bergson (2002) asserts that people need to be “deepening and widening” their perceptions (p. 251), as this would open up new possibilities, not least in psychology: “[...] I am of the opinion that an entirely new light would illuminate many psychological and psycho-physiological questions if we recognized that distinct perception is merely cut, for the purposes of practical existence, out of a wider canvas” (p. 252). Bergson thus anticipates what Pederson performs in his revised literary trauma theory. While Pederson does not specify what aspects such a close observation of the “actual text” should incorporate, I would suggest that such an examination must not only focus on the content (i.e. the topics and themes touched upon) but also include structural and formal aspects of a text, as these are integral to the *gesamtkunstwerk* of the text and contribute to its meaning.

Such a comprehensive approach to the text proves very fruitful in the case of Wyld’s *All the Birds, Singing*, which is characterized by a highly original narrative structure. The novel consists of two intertwined narrative strands, whose chapters are narrated in alternation. Jake’s first narrative deals with her life on the British sheep farm and represents a “mimetic text,” that is, a chronological, retrospective narrative told in the past tense by a narrating self temporally distanced from the experiencing or narrated self (Richardson, 2002, p. 49). Into this first narrative a second one is intertwined, whose chapters alternate with those of the first one and deal with Jake’s previous life in Australia. The power of this second narrative derives from the fact that, in direct contrast to our conventional sense of time as progressive, the movement in time is reversed. The narrative is told backwards, starting with Jake’s decision to escape from Australia and ending with her adolescence and childhood, which means that it “feature[s] strikingly impossible or antimimetic elements” (Alber, Ivesen, Skov Nielsen and Richardson, 2013, p. 1). It is an example of a so-called “unnatural narrative,” as it does not “mimetically reproduce the world as we know it” but instead “confront[s] us with bizarre storyworlds which are governed by principles that have very little to do with the real world around us” (Alber, qtd. in Alber, Ivesen, Skov Nielsen & Richardson, 2013, p. 2). Richardson (2002) labels backward-moving unnatural narratives as “antinomic” (p. 49). The interlocking of a mimetic and an antinomic narrative in *All the Birds, Singing* results in a counter-movement. On the one hand, the two narrative strands are moving away from each other in time, one forward, the other backward, so that the temporal distance lying between the individual chapters constantly grows bigger as the respective plots move towards the future and the distant past. On the other hand, the two narrative strands are intertwined, which means that the temporally distant episodes also occur side by side and are thus characterized by spatial proximity.

This idiosyncratic structure is meaningful with regard to Jake’s trauma, for, as it turns out, her intention to blot out her traumatic experience proves very difficult, if not impossible. Involuntarily, fragments of her past repeatedly force themselves into her consciousness when triggered by events in her present surroundings. Hence, she must remember her personal history even if she does not want to, which once more echoes Bergson’s (2002) argument that the past has actually been preserved rather than lost. Events recounted in the first narrative repeatedly evoke memories of the past, which are subsequently narrated in the second narrative, so that often an action in the present is paralleled by the memory of a similar action in the past. This results in the paradoxical situation that, while the first narrative shows Jake’s attempt to “outrun her past,” the second one represents a gradual movement towards the past (Meloy, 2014, n.p.). At the very moment the narrator-protagonist is trying to ignore her memories, she remembers and, ironically, recounts them. Her checking for a hammer under

her bed every evening as described in chapter 3, for instance, is mirrored in chapter 4 by her memory of how she searched for a hammer on the Australian sheep farm (Wyld, pp. 21 and 29). Similarly, her mentioning that she keeps a breadknife in her bedroom is followed by her account of how she used to hide a knife behind her bed when she was staying with Otto in Australia (pp. 90 and 99). Moreover, her companion, Lloyd, tells her in chapter 13 that “the human eye senses movement before all else”; this very sentence is repeated in chapter 14 when she remembers hiding from her tormentor, Otto, in Australia (pp. 105 and 114). In reaction to triggers in the first narrative, Jake ends up recounting her personal history step by step in the second, antinomic narrative until these accounts of her past experiences culminate at the end of the novel in her narration of the trauma of her first, unhappy love during adolescence (chapters 26, 28 and 30).

In this context, it is crucial that the information about the past is not provided in a chronological order, as in conventional narratives, but told “too late,” so to speak. With the second narrative strand moving backwards, some previous events are only explained at a later stage in the novel, so that it takes a while for the reader to be provided with the information necessary to understand some of the implications and connections. In particular, the deeper relationships between the characters are only gradually revealed to the reader, and some important correlations between the protagonist’s past and present state – a sense of duration, to use Bergson’s term – are brought to the fore in retrospect. For instance, the sense of guilt Jake experiences after accidentally killing one of her sheep in the penultimate chapter of the first narrative strand (Wyld, p. 209) is mirrored and further highlighted in the subsequent penultimate chapter of the second narrative strand, when she recounts the details of Flora’s death in the fire (pp. 223–224). It is only after reading about the tragic event in Jake’s youth in the Australian narrative that the reader understands that the feeling of guilt has persisted in her life and that, in the first narrative, she is consequently mourning much more than merely the death of an animal. Indeed, the sheep acquires a symbolic meaning and comes to stand for Flora, who was also accidentally and innocently killed.

That some events only become available for narration at a later stage in her narrative is due to the fact that the narrating self of the antinomic narrative only (re-)experiences – and thus processes – her traumatic past at the moment of narrating it, although, in effect, the events happened long before. In contrast to chronological, retrospective narratives, where the narrating “I” looks back on the past and is therefore temporally removed from the experiencing “I,” the narrating and the experiencing self coincide in antinomic narratives: crucially, there is no temporal distance between the incident itself and its narration. At the moment of telling, the narrating self experiences the events again as if they were happening contemporaneously. This simultaneity of experience and narration also explains why antinomic narratives are told in the present tense. The present “momentarily creates an illusory (as-if) coincidence of two time-levels, literally ‘evoking’ the narrated moment at the moment of narration” (Cohn, qtd. in Tegli, 2016, p. 7). The present tense “functions not as a ‘true’ but as a metaphorical tense” (Cohn, 1978, p. 198) as “the speaker, as it were, forgets all about time and recalls what he is recounting as vividly as if it were before his eyes” (Jespersen qtd. in Cohn, 1978, p. 198). The very fact that Jake’s Australian narrative is indeed recounted in the present tense indicates that she has not been able put any temporal distance between her past and present, but, instead, re-experiences her first love and the disappointment that accompanies it as if they were happening right at that moment, which again hints at the indivisibility of past and present. While she has ignored the past so far, she now re-lives every moment of it and thereby processes her memory. What is more, in contrast to retrospective narratives, the narrating “I” and the reader approach the past together; it is not only the reader who wants to know what happened (as in conventional

narratives); the narrator also re-discovers the past, so that, interestingly, the reader and the narrator are in the same situation of experiencing the events (as if) for the first time.⁴

As Jake's self is composed of two voices or narrating selves and can thus "be seen as a sign marking the site of multiple voices that can be disentangled to a greater or lesser degree [...]," it is neither "single, unified [nor] monolithic" (Smith and Watson, 2010, p. 74). In accordance with postmodern conceptions of identity, her self, instead, is dynamic, incomplete and "more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than [...] unity" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Indeed, such a "split, fragmented, provisional [and] multiple" narrating self (Smith and Watson, 2010, p. 74), among other things, may serve to "reproduce more accurately the jagged fissures within a single subjectivity" than one narrative voice would, as Richardson (2006) argues (p. 67). What is more, the two different voices and narrating selves represent different aspects of her persona and have different functions. The narrating self of the retrospective narrative that looks back at the past, and is able to structure and interpret the events, contrasts with the narrating self of the antinomic narrative that is still in the process of regaining the past. The latter lacks stability as it does not recount events from "an external [...] point of vantage, from which [it] could survey and define the structuredness of the reported sequence as one integrated whole" and for this reason is not able to interpret the events from a distance (Margolin qtd. in Tegla, 2016, p. 8).

The simultaneity of narration and experience, and, thus, the indivisibility of past and present, become particularly meaningful at the end of the novel when the moments furthest away in time are recounted immediately after one another, a device that influences the reader's interpretation. For the revelation of the terrible events responsible for Jake's trauma in the second narrative is immediately followed by an account of a growing friendship between Lloyd and Jake in the subsequent chapter of the first narrative. Having felt haunted by a phantom throughout the novel, now, finally, she no longer runs away in panic when she senses its presence again, but stays at Lloyd's side:

'It's huge,' he [Lloyd] said in a voice that did not sound like his own.
 'It's here – it's just here.'
 'And you see it?'
 'It's just in front of us.'
 Something crunched in the undergrowth.
 'Should we run?' I said, *but I didn't think we would*.
 It moved deeper into the woods and we stayed standing, watching and listening.
 'My god,' said Lloyd quietly.
 I looked down and saw that we were holding hands. (Wyld, p. 228; emphasis added)

The fact that Jake no longer runs away at this critical moment implies relief and improvement: for the first time, she no longer feels the urge to escape. As this moment immediately follows upon the account of the fire and Flora's tragic death in the antinomic narrative strand, it is suggested that the very narration of the trauma is synonymous with a first step towards healing. This is supported by the very last chapter of the novel, which reveals that, as a child, Jake felt at home in her family and trusted that things would never change: "[...] this is how life will always be, and I will always be there" (Wyld, p. 229). While life, against her wish, has revealed

⁴ Richardson (2002) explains that in antinomic narratives "both narrator and reader are moving prospectively (present tense, even future tense), though time's arrow is reversed" (p. 49).

itself to be full of change and she did not always stay at home, the very fact that the novel ends on this note implies that she has made a first step towards recovering the sense of trust she had as a child. Once again, chapters in the respective narrative strands interact and have an impact on each other, and thus also on the way the reader interprets the events recounted therein: with the cause of Jake's pain being narrated in juxtaposition with the beginning of her journey towards healing, the novel communicates the message put forward by psychology that improvement becomes possible once the trauma is narrativized.⁵

Wyld's novel not only emphasizes the importance of the narrativization of trauma but also suggests a possible form this may take. In that the two narrative strands are interlocked, the two voices are ultimately mutually enabling. On the one hand, gaps in the first plot are gradually filled as the past is narrated and Jake's traumatic memories are voiced in the second narrative strand. On the other hand, traumatic experiences that she has been evading for a long time are finally confronted, so that a dialogue between inner voices – and selves – is created. There are some psychological studies which suggest that, indeed, the mere verbalization of inner states may already help to overcome feelings of stress and mourning, so that neither the presence of another person nor immediate communication are absolutely required (Waller and Scheidt, 2010, p. 68).⁶ This also seems to be true for Jake Whyte, who does not talk to anyone else, but gradually develops an inner dialogue between narrating selves. Previously suppressed or ignored memories are confronted, internally verbalized, and subsequently processed in the second narrative strand. As such, Jake exhibits that the formation of selfhood in literature indeed “involves language [...] as a tool of *conversation*” (Moretti, 1985, p. 133; emphasis given). In the novels of the 18th and 19th century, “conversation” was meant literally: characters had to acquire the ability to communicate with one another, which included the “willingness of the participants to abandon their own viewpoint in order to embrace that of the other” (Moretti, 1985, p. 133). Wyld's novel, by contrast, shows that, in the case of a 21st-century trauma narrative, such a conversation may be internalized as well. The various selves of a character need to learn to enter into an (inner) dialogue with one another, to grant each other space, to engage with each other sincerely as well as to have “*trust* in language” (Moretti, 1985, p. 133; emphasis given), in order for self-formation to become possible. Taking into account the past and voicing a trauma leads to a sensible perception of the present and reveals a willingness to go on living. The powerful message that the development of an inner dialogue between selves is a precondition for successful self-formation is, finally, also symbolically expressed by the title of the novel: all the birds – as symbols of Jake's various selves – must be able and allowed to “sing,” that is, to have a voice and articulate themselves, in order for a person to be able to develop a personality.⁷

⁵ See McAdams (2006), for instance: “Stories may bring our lives together when we feel shattered, mend us when we are broken, heal us when we are sick, help us cope in times of stress, and even move us toward psychological fulfillment and maturity” (p. 393).

⁶ Waller and Scheidt (2010) refer to the studies of Pennebaker (1993) and Pennebaker et al. (1997) in this context (p. 68).

⁷ Throughout the novel, various birds (both European and Australian) are mentioned. They symbolically represent the various facets of the protagonist's situation. The crows, for instance, “are believed to exist in the past, present and future simultaneously, to embody darkness within light and light within darkness [...]” (King, 2007, p. 139) and thus they symbolize Jake's various voices – past and present – which fuse into a dialogue in the course of the novel. Similarly, the currawong (an Australian bird) is believed to be a bird that helps “remove negativity from our life; the burdens and baggage, fear, pain, grief and dishonesty” and helps to face “inner demons – and depose them forever” while simultaneously guiding one to “unite [one's] spiritual, mental and physical selves” (King, 2007, p. 144). As the currawong is mentioned in various chapters of the antinomic narrative set in Australia, this particular bird symbolizes Jake's gradual recovery of her past and of the indivisibility of change (with the past and present forming an entity). It therefore functions as a metaphor for what Jake will have to do in order to heal mentally and physically, namely to face her trauma rather than try to outrun it.

These findings also have wide-ranging implications when considering Jake's trauma from the perspective of genre. As she feels haunted by her past, the traumatic experience of her first love represents a typical instance of a trial, as often occurs in conventional coming-of-age stories. More specifically, in Moretti's (1985) terminology, Jake's trial represents an obstacle that must be overcome rather than an opportunity.⁸ On closer inspection, however, it becomes evident that Jake's trauma is an obstacle or trial with a difference. As the second narrative strand develops side by side with the first, Jake's crisis increasingly becomes the main focus of the text. Initially, Jake just wanted to tell Greg "the in-between bits of [her] life..." (Wyld, p. 24), but, as the analysis has shown, she increasingly narrates more aspects of her past as a result of her recurrent memories, causing the reader to gain an overwhelming sense of her suffering and crisis. Indeed, in the case of *All the Birds, Singing*, the moment of the protagonist's trial appears as under a magnifying glass. It does not just function as the necessary starting point of a journey towards resolution and maturation; rather, it is shifted to centre stage in this text, so that practically the entire novel deals with the trial. Accordingly, her crisis narrative (i.e. the second narrative strand) is ultimately more substantial than the account of her present. As far as Jake's development to adulthood is concerned, this means that she is as if *on hold*. For most of the text, she is shown to be paralyzed by her trauma and unable to move on with her life. Her situation bears a strong resemblance to that of Prince Tamino in Mozart and Schickaneder's *The Magic Flute*, as described by Moretti (1985): "[...] Tamino is nothing. He is pure potentiality. He can be what he ends up being, or he can be knocked back down to what he was [...] he is *on hold*, at zero degree [...]" (p. 129; emphasis added). Similarly, Jake's potentiality is explored in the novel, with both options – the return to her dark past and the gradual progression towards a brighter future – being investigated and, indeed, substantiated in the two narrative strands moving in opposite directions. This means that Moretti's (1985) characterization of Tamino's present as "elastic [and] elusive" (p. 129) can be applied to Jake as well, because Wyld's novel never fully and conclusively resolves the conflict arising from these opposite narrative directions. Jake needs to first confront and process her trauma in an imaginary and ongoing dialogue between inner voices before she can build a personality and successfully enter adult life. Yet, significantly, the novel never arrives at the end of this process: the sense of final achievement so typical of conventional coming-of-age narratives is never reached; even her first step towards improvement (implied by her memory of home) is no more than a possibility that is vaguely hinted at, as the text does not move beyond the state of that "zero degree" (Moretti, 1985, p. 129) in which Jake finds herself and finishes before she has fully recovered from her trauma. As a consequence, there is no sense of real closure, neither with regard to Jake's (grown-up) self nor with regard to the text. Instead, the representation of the protagonist's crisis and her past trauma is ultimately what *All the Birds, Singing* is really about.

In terms of genre, therefore, Wyld's novel significantly deviates from conventional coming-of-age stories, especially with regard to the narrative function of the trial. In marked contrast to a strategically grim coming-of-age narrative, the traumatic past of the protagonist is not something that has already been left behind completely and can be looked at from a distance by an adult narrator recounting his youth. Instead, with Jake's crisis resisting "incorporation in an uplifting storyline" (Gilmore and Marshall, 2013, p. 22), the novel challenges the

⁸ In his classification of trials, Moretti (1985) usually speaks of obstacles as "external barriers" (p. 132). By comparison, Jake's trauma represents an internal barrier. Whereas this change from external to internal barriers is likely to result from the process of internalization that fiction has undergone from the 18th century to the present, the implications for the protagonist remain the same. As with external barriers, the adolescent must overcome internal barriers in order to "enter into [his/her] own role as an adult" (p. 132).

conventional model of coming-of-age stories and thus comes to (individually) perform the genre.⁹ While it shares the core topic of a young protagonist's journey towards adulthood, it places the main focus on the protagonist's crisis and trauma, rather than on the constant move towards the climax of resolution, as is usually the case. As a result, *All the Birds, Singing* confirms the fact that literary genres are "highly malleable forms or sets of conventions that tend to change their shape in different historical, cultural, aesthetic [...] contexts" rather than "given or stable entities" (Basseler, 2011, p. 41).

Conclusion

In his essay "Backwards" Chatman (2009) wonders what "authors gain from employing backwards and/or anonymizing discourse – with all its extra burdening of the reader's attention and patience" (p. 48). This analysis of *All the Birds, Singing* with reference to Bergson's (2002) concept of the "indivisibility of change" and Pederson's (2014) revised literary trauma theory has provided an answer to this question. The interlocking of two narrative strands moving in opposite directions reveals that Jake Whyte's traumatic past is by no means forgotten, but remains an integral part of her present. Indeed, the novel shows that the eventual stabilization and healing of the self in the present depends on the continual confrontation of a traumatic past, and thus of a previous, unstable self. Wyld's novel performs this to an extent that the text can no longer be regarded as the escape narrative it seemed to be at first. Instead, it is a coming-of-age narrative in which a long silent and traumatized self finally finds a voice and enters a dialogue with the protagonist's other selves. As such, the novel demonstrates that traumatic experiences suffered during childhood and adolescence may have a lasting effect. Accordingly, in the case of trauma, processes of coming-of-age and maturation necessitate an incessant negotiation and continual processing of this painful personal history and experience in narrative form. Growing up depends on the young person acknowledging his/her past and making it a meaningful part of the present. Finally, in terms of genre, the novel deviates from strategically grim coming-of-age narratives and their conventional ending in that it does not offer a sense of achievement, as the effects of the trauma continue to challenge the protagonist. *All the Birds, Singing* suggests that the genre of coming-of-age novels should not be limited to texts merely showing the young protagonist's outgrowing of the crisis; instead, it needs to be elastic and flexible enough to incorporate texts that document the persistence of trauma in a protagonist's life.

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⁹ Frow suggests regarding individual texts as "performances of genre rather than reproductions of a class to which they belong" (qtd. in Basseler, 2011, p. 58).

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